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SUBJECT: BELGIUM: NO DECISION ON IRENA MEMBERSHIP

REF: STATE 61286

¶1. (SBU) Econoff raised reftel points on June 25 with Ambassador Philippe Nieuwenhuys, head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' energy unit. Nieuwenhuys said Belgium is not yet in a position to join the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA). Because of Belgium's political system, the federal government must gain agreement with the country's three regional governments -- Brussels, Flanders, and Wallonia. However, the federal government was unable to gain the regions' approval leading up to regional elections that took place in early June 2009, and now must wait for the regions to form new governments and name ministers before it can reprise discussions. There is no way of knowing when the regional governments will be formed, although conventional wisdom is that it will be sometime later this summer or this fall. Nieuwenhuys said that the federal government and regional governments still need to work out the modalities for representation at IRENA, as well as how to coordinate regional and federal policies.

¶2. (SBU) Nieuwenhuys told econoff Germany had been pushing hard on its neighbors, including Belgium, to join IRENA and to support Germany's bid to host the Secretariat. Nieuwenhuys also indicated that Belgium was still not completely sure what IRENA's focus would be, although Germany has told them that IRENA will focus on renewable energy cooperation with developing countries. As Belgium's current development assistance program has already been approved by Parliament, with renewable energy cooperation not on the list of approved projects or programs, Nieuwenhuys was unsure what Belgium might be able to do at IRENA in the short term, even if political agreement to sign is forthcoming.

¶3. (SBU) Nieuwenhuys appeared surprised that the USG was supporting the United Arab Emirate's bid, but said he understood France is also supporting the UAE. Belgium has not decided which country to support, he said. Belgium will have a three-person delegation at the IRENA meetings in Egypt, he said -- one from the MFA, one from the Flemish regional government, and someone from the Energy Department of the federal government's Ministry of Economy.

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